

Changing the Way We Say “OH!” or Valuing the Profession of Jewish Education By Bruce Powell

What our culture values is often reflected in the way we respond to certain kinds of news. That response includes the words we use, the tone in which we say those words, our body language, and some deep visceral communication that somehow moves through the ether and is received by the bearer of the news.

For those of us brought up in American Jewish culture where education and professional status are highly valued, our responses to the questions, “Where do you (or did you) go to college?” or “What do you do for a living?” can be immensely telling as to how we value that information. For example, I recently asked a former student whom I had not seen in several years where she ultimately attended college after graduating high school. She said, “Harvard.” My almost involuntary response was an elongated and nuanced “Ohhhh!” However, when I asked her friend where she went to college, she mumbled something about attending a state college. To her, I responded in a short, forced “Oh” that I tried to make sound enthusiastic and encouraging. Simply put, I couldn’t do it. No matter how much I preach to students that the keys to success are one’s ethical and moral character, hard work, vision, and so forth, my programmed, cultural value response was clear: Harvard was better than a state college and that I was far more impressed with the Harvard girl’s achievements.

With some simple observation of people’s reactions, you will find similar positive or negative cultural responses to questions about people’s professions. Perhaps most poignant is the comparison, especially among the educated Jewish class, between our reaction to someone telling us she or he is a physician or she or he telling us he is a teacher. Try it. Ask someone what he or she does for a living. How does the “Oh” sound inside your soul to the answer of “doctor” or “teacher”? I know that, even as an educator, and even after attempting to train myself to be more impressed with, or at least equally impressed with, those who chose education as a profession, I still find myself sending a deep, visceral, tonal, and nuanced response through the ether that, in truth, I value medicine more than education: “Ohhhh! You’re a physician! What’s your specialty?” or “Oh. What do you teach?”

Perhaps the key to building up the field of Jewish education, to attracting the “best and brightest and most inspirational” to the profession, is simply to transform the way our unique Jewish sub-culture says the word “Oh” when informed that a person is a Jewish education professional. I might even suggest that what we pay our Jewish educators is not necessarily as important as how we truly value those who teach our children Jewish values, text, history, and life. Most of us, for example, are still more impressed with those who choose medicine than those who pursue law, even though, today, lawyers are often compensated, over time, more than physicians. Studies have shown that judges, professors, physicians, even rabbis, all of whom make less than many business people, still command a high status. This is not true, however, for our Jewish educators and teachers.

Even among teachers and educators, there is an internal “pecking order.” Those who teach first grade have less status, and often lower pay, than those who teach high school science, English, or Jewish studies. Amazingly, those who teach our children to read have, perhaps, the lowest value in terms of monetary compensation and the lowest social and professional status, even though reading is certainly the basis for just about everything we need to accomplish in education or, for that matter, in virtually all professions. And what is even more telling is that those who are administrators, who rarely have direct teaching responsibilities for our children, earn more and have even higher social status than anyone else in the profession.

If you believe that the statements above are not always true, try the “Oh” test. The next time you are among a group of educators whom you do not know, perhaps at the next CAJE Conference, listen carefully to the conversations and reactions; listen to your own internal response when a new acquaintance tells you that she or he is teaching elementary grades or she or he just landed a headship. More to the point, listen to the responses of those who do know each other and want to catch-up on what each others’ children are doing, listening for the various “Oh” tones.

So, too, at the next Bar Mitzvah, wedding, graduation (especially at graduations), listen to the conversations, to the “Ohs.” Most importantly, listen to your own internal voice.

That said, the challenge now becomes to change how we all say the word “Oh” when hearing that someone has chosen Jewish education for his or her career. It will require a cultural sea change. It will require a vast re-education about what we truly value, rather than what is paid sanctimonious lip service. We all need to believe that it is, indeed, of equal or greater importance to become a Jewish educator or teacher than it is to be a lawyer, physician, accountant, or record executive. Jews in America take great pride that our people have made such prodigious contributions to science, mathematics, engineering, politics, and law, to name only a few areas. Perhaps we need to take similar pride when one chooses to pursue Jewish learning, education, scholarship, and teaching.

In the old days, when a talmid chacham entered a room, all would stand in respect and deference to his great learning. Perhaps we should begin to stand when the teacher approaches, when the Jewish educator is among us.

We will know we have succeeded in changing the culture when our own Jewish children come home one day and say that they have decided to pursue a career in Jewish education and their parents say, “Ohhhhhhh!!!”

Questions for Discussion

1. Does this article reflect your own experience? If yes, how?
2. What practical steps could be taken from within the profession to raise its prestige? What can be done within your own work setting? In your local community? What do you think that CAJE could do nationally?
3. What are reasonable expectations for altering the way people say “oh” in your community /educational setting?
4. How could this issue be brought to your lay leadership and/or constituency in a productive way?

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